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A tale of two families: chance and serendipity in researching food poverty

Vasco Ramos

From mid-2016 to mid-2017, I was part of the Portuguese research team working on the Families and Food in Hard Times research project. This international research focuses on food poverty among families with young people (aged 11-15 years old) in three European countries (the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Norway). The project sought to examine different dimensions and experiences of food poverty in a context of austerity. We planned to use several methods, from surveys and interviews, kitchen tours with parents and photo-elicitation interviews with children.

In Portugal, three different settings within the Greater Lisbon Area were selected to conduct fieldwork. After careful examination of statistical data (on poverty rates, average income and housing costs) and taking into account geographical accessibility, we chose a Lisbon borough; a suburb; and a rural parish of Sintra. I was pleased by this choice, having been brought up in the parish. Overall, my knowledge of the region was helpful when we started to make appointments; I knew my way around. Still, during fieldwork, there were times when I encountered family members at a local coffee shop and had to come up with alternative study subjects, as not to besmirch our respondent's status in the community.



Parents were contacted through school via a self-completion survey, which covered consumption patterns and food coping strategies to deal with income shortage. These were used to earmark potential cases of families enduring food poverty. The package included information about the project, and replies were sent directly to the university to ensure confidentiality, using a pre-stamped addressed envelope. This approach worked well in the rural parish, possibly because the school provided full cooperation. From the 520 questionnaires sent, we received about 150 replies. Half of the questionnaires provided information that led us to consider that the current economic circumstances of the family were affecting their food practices.

The research team were the cases into batches, according to the self-declared severity of food insecurity. One interesting response to the survey was from a female-led single-parent family; let us call them the Santos. It seemed like they were going through severe hardship, as the mother reported struggling to meet her children's dietary needs and resorted to the local food bank. She left comments on the side of the questionnaire urging us to contact her. Before attempting to make an appointment, I confirmed the address using Google Maps, something that I did with all interviews. The postal code indicated an isolated area, within a large pinewood, and not far from a popular beach. Several houses were facing the ocean, some with pools and gardens.

Awareness of this context made the case compelling. Did the Santos live in one of these houses? If so, was the mortgage on the house causing food poverty? These and other questions made this case a priority, but contacting them proved difficult because of bad cell coverage. The first attempt to schedule an interview with the Santos family did not go too well. The mother started by confirming availability but told us not to “even think of going over to her place”. She was also wary of how we would interact with her daughter. While we booked an appointment in a public place, I had to postpone it due to other urgent engagements — but the mother contacted by SMS reiterating her interest in participating. In the meantime, we speculated on the reasons for what felt like an ambivalent first contact.

We carried on with fieldwork, conducting interviews in urban areas, collecting observations and data. A few months later, the research team returned to the rural area. There was a case of a couple with two teenagers, let us call them the Lima's, which struck our attention, because of contradictory information. Children were entitled to free school meals, indicating low household income, but answers to the survey also showed no adaptations in food procurement or consumption patterns. Interestingly, this family lived within the same postal code as the single-mother family (close to a beach, in an upscale area).

A dual interview was scheduled with the mother and her eleven-year-old son. Over the phone, she said that she lived in a large house, with a covered pool. I wondered if this had been a mistake in recruitment. However, I decided to go ahead based on the information from the survey questionnaire. While on our way, I got a text message changing the venue to a coffee shop in a nearby town. Although we met in a public place, she quickly revealed that her ordeal was, in no small extent, a consequence of



the substantial personal debt accrued by her husband. This episode was a critical negative turning point for in her life. Credit companies seized their home, assets and a large part of their income; they had declared bankruptcy and entered a multi-year plan of debt recovery. While both parents were working full-time, the Lima family is highly dependent on support from maternal grandparents. They share the grandparents' luxurious house, occupying different floors. Moreover, the grandparents pay utilities, most groceries, other daily expenses (gasoline, expenses towards the children's education), and lend a car to the parents for daily use. Furthermore, although both family units live independently, the grandparents often have them over for lunch, dinner or buy food for the children.

Their situation also uncovered asymmetries in terms of class background within the couple. Whereas the wife comes from an upper-middle class background, the husband comes from a working-class background. He was a well-paid sports coach, but when the crisis hit, he took less well-paid jobs but used credit to maintain the family lifestyle. As the crisis deepened and instalments became unbearable, the wife's family and (home) was the fallback option. The Lima family displayed one long-standing trend in family networks and informal support in Portuguese society, namely that assistance flows mostly on the wife's side of the family. They also show how individuals from more favourable class positions can mobilise and access higher levels of support.

However, even with all the help, at times food-related constraints in this family were extreme. The mother went as far as selling personal items online to buy food, something that she withheld from her grandparents. She did not want to participate in visual methods. Reflecting on all that I learned during our interactions with this family, a public place, located far from home, provided a safe space for the revelation of the personal/familial "drama" that lead to the present.

Weeks later, I recontacted the first case, the female-led single family, the Santos. Arrangements were straightforward, but the mother told me that I could not come to her house. She suggested a public place and coincidentally chose the same coffee shop. I learned that she recently separated and had custody of a daughter, which led to financial strain. Her story had similar traits with the Lima's mother. She was also from a middle-class background, went to private schools in Lisbon and spent time at her grandparents' summerhouse in Sintra. After meeting a partner from the rural area, she became a homemaker and settled in a small village. The economic crisis coincided with the end of her marriage, and she started looking for a job, only to find precarious work. She recently took a job as a garden caretaker in a large property. While wages are low, accommodation in a detached house plus electricity, water and gas are included. The standard of living went abruptly down, and she spoke of "getting adapted to everything". A self-declared health-conscious shopper, she struggles to find options that meet her family needs and preferences. She resorts to the Food Bank for staples, to save money to buy organic produce and proteins in the supermarket.

Throughout the interview, I realised that her bosses were the grandparents of the other respondent. I initially felt befuddled and wanted to know more. What did she know about the other family? Do their kids play together? However, revealing that



I had spoken with the Lima family would be a breach of trust. I carefully attempted to find out what type of interaction existed between these families and if they shared resources. I learned that both families lived within the same compound but knew little about each other, and barely had any contact. Unknowingly and accidentally, both participated in the same research project. However, their lives are entangled; both depend on the same elderly couple, one by wage relations, and the other by family support. If this couple disappeared, both would be in even direr straits.

Reflecting on the serendipity of encountering these two nested families, discussions with colleagues recalled personal memories. From the outset, I had an image of the locale where these two families currently live. My maternal grandmother frequently talks about this place. Her father was the tenant of a small plot of land, and she spent most of her childhood in a nearby village. Often, she recollected her own experience of poverty and deprivation from the early 1930s. Sometimes, when her father went there to plough or reap the field, he would gather shellfish from the shore. Grandmother also recalls the rare delight of eating fresh mussels with lemon and garlic. However, her memories of wholesome and straightforward country food, going back more than 75 years, are exceptional and interspersed with numerous accounts of scarceness. Since then, a lot has changed. Subsistence agriculture and rural work are obsolete. While horticulture remains a significant economic activity in the area, most locals work on services and commute to the county seat or Lisbon.



Figure 1: Grandma and me, talking about old pictures (February 2019)



On the other hand, the peacefulness and natural beauty of this place have been attracting new dwellers. These are mostly well-off families, as the possibilities of urban development are limited, which drives housing prices up. Additionally, many media and other discourses associate deprivation to poor suburban neighbourhoods, while the countryside is associated with communitarianism and with different iterations of the rural idyll. In a way, food poverty may seem incompatible and out of place within this setting. Still, from my trajectory and grandmother's stories, I knew first-hand it that has long been a feature of this social milieu. While it may be argued that there is an illusion of spontaneity (Rivoal and Salazar 2013), as the conditions for these serendipitous occurrences were facilitated by choices that I made, strikingly these two cases unveiled more than I could expect; entanglement between the two families; the present and the past; my personal and familiar story and the locale.

During our research, I came across an ethnographic study about this rural parish, carried out by the late American anthropologist Joyce Riegelhaupt (1964). She was studying the integration of a “*saloio*”¹ *community* in the national fabric. At the time, market-relations were changing the face of the community, covering up some of its peasant society traits, even under a fascist regime that endorsed agrarianism. Fifty-odd years later, working in the same territory, we intended to engage these families and their children in ethnographic practices, which included multiple modes of representation. Unfortunately, and understandably, neither family wanted to proceed, citing their status as dwellers. However, their cases and the refusal was very telling about the complexity, randomness and emotional suffering caused by food poverty. Keeping us away was a form to exert control, something that cannot do concerning many aspects of their life. Welcoming someone at home would disclose their actual living circumstances, not only to a researcher but also to relatives and co-tenants. While their refusal initially felt like a setback, our chanceful meeting and these serendipitous episodes turned out to be immensely revealing about the social dynamics underlying food poverty in a contemporary rural space.

Notes

[1] *Saloio* is a word that traditionally designated the inhabitants of rural areas surrounding Lisbon, to the North and West. The term has obscure origins, but it is most likely derived from Arabic. It can come either from “*çahrauii*” - an inhabitant of the desert - or from “*salatin*” - Moorish corsairs from Salé. While the term is sometimes used with derogatory connotations, namely distrustfulness, shrewdness, stubbornness and avarice, it also is associated with hard work and honesty. Locally, the word merely designates a person's origin.

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